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Gender and discipline in 5–12-month-old infants: A longitudinal study☆

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ABSTRACT

We examined the effects of infant age and gender on the behaviors of infants and mothers during discipline interactions using longitudinal, naturalistic, home-based, taped observations of 16 mother–infant dyads (eight males and eight females). These observations were conducted between the child ages of 5 and 12 months and used a devised Maternal Discipline Coding System to code for the occurrence of discipline events. During discipline interactions, mothers vocalized longer, used harsher tones, and used more explanations with older compared to younger infants. Male infants were more likely than female infants to cry or whine during discipline events. Mothers of male infants used longer vocalizations, more words, and more affectionate terms than mothers of female infants. Male infants were more difficult during discipline interactions than female infants, but it appeared that mothers of males responded to this difficulty by using milder discipline techniques.

1. Gender and discipline in infancy

In their groundbreaking 1974 book on sex differences, Maccoby and Jacklin cited sex differences in aggression as one of the few robust findings in the psychological literature. Since this important work much attention has focused on different forms of aggression between girls and boys (Ostrov & Keating, 2004). Generally, it is believed that these different types of aggression, which have the potential to become disruptive and even anti-social in extreme manifestations, may emerge from a variety of parenting characteristics, including ones that also promote insecure attachment behaviors. Despite a considerable literature on sex differences in aggression and its relationship to attachment and on the potential negative consequences of overly internalizing and overly externalizing behavior, there are very few studies of parent child disciplinary interactions (a) with infants and (b) in which possible gender differences are examined (Casas et al., 2006; Kawabata, Alink, Tseng, van Ijzendoorn, & Crick, 2011; Nelson, Hart, Yang, Olsen, & Jin, 2006). Here we report the results of a small study of mother infant disciplinary interactions observed regularly over a several month period.

The literature on gender and discipline is far from clear. Straus et al. (1998) found that mothers generally discipline young children more harshly than fathers, primarily due to the greater time mothers spend caring for their children. In a survey-based study on parents of children between 4 and 35 months of age, Regalado, Sareen, Inkelas, Wissow, and Halfon

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(2004) found that the sex of the child had no effect on parentally reported types of discipline. Socolar, Savage, Keyes-Elstein, and Evans (2005) also found that child gender did not influence parental discipline in their study on parental discipline of 12–19-month-old children.

In an observation-based study of toddlers (14 months) and their mothers, Power and Chapieski (1986) found that the sex of the child had no significant effect on the child's rate of misbehavior (playing with forbidden objects) or the mother's use of discipline. Their review of similar studies found few sex differences in measures of toddler compliance and misbehavior. In an observation-based study, Kochanska, Kuczynski, and Radke-Yarrow (1989) found that the sex of the child (16–44 months) had no bearing on maternal use of child management methods. More recent studies by Kochanska, however, have found sex differences (Kochanska, 2001; Kochanska, Aksan, & Nichols, 2003; Kochanska, Coy, & Murray, 2001; Kochanska, Coy, Tjebkes, & Husarek, 1998; Kochanska, Tjebkes, & Forman, 1998).

Using both survey and observational measures of maternal discipline and child misbehavior in 1–3-year-olds, van Zeijl et al. (2007) found that mothers of boys and mothers of girls did not differ in their use of discipline strategies. However, boys showed higher rates of physical aggression than girls. Lytton and Romney (1991) conducted a meta-analysis of 172 studies on child gender and parent behavior in an attempt to determine "whether parents make systematic differences in their rearing of boys and girls" (p. 267). The study found few significant differences, but there was a slight tendency for parents to use more physical punishment on boys than girls.

Miner and Clarke-Stewart's (2008) findings of sex differences in child externalizing behavior raise important methodological issues. Mothers who did not use harsh discipline and had higher maternal sensitivity ratings were effective at reducing levels of child externalizing behavior at later ages, an effect that was especially strong for boys. However, the finding of sex differences in rates of child externalizing behavior depended upon the identity of the reporter, as teacher ratings were significantly higher for the boys than for the girls. There was no significant difference between the ratings of mothers of boys and the ratings of mothers of girls. The use of direct observations, rather than adult reporting methods, could help determine whether the source of such differences stems from informant bias or contextual differences in child behavior.

The research of McFadyen-Ketchum, Bates, Dodge, and Pettit (1996) suggests that maternal discipline effects may have a different trajectory for boys and girls. The study investigated whether levels of maternal coercion and non-affection during discipline interactions predicted levels of child disruption and aggression from kindergarten to third grade. Although a maternal behavior profile of high coercion and low affection was linked to increased levels of aggression during kindergarten for boys and girls, the effects of maternal behavior on changes in the child's behavioral profile depended on the child's sex. For boys, a high coercion/low affection behavior profile was associated with increased aggression over time. For girls, higher levels of coercion actually predicted decreased aggression over time, and there was no relationship between maternal affection and aggression changes.

Kochanska et al. (1989, 2003) observed boys and girls in laboratory settings with their mothers during the ages of 14, 22, 33 and 45 months. The observation scenarios consisted of "do" (toy cleanup) and "don't" (refrain from touching attractive toys) tasks. They found that mothers of boys used more power assertion than mothers of girls. Girls demonstrated higher rates of empathy and maternal imitation than boys. Another study focused on rates of child compliance in response to maternal requests and prohibitions (Kochanska et al., 2001). For the "do" task, girls showed higher rates of committed compliance at 14 months, but rates for both sexes were similar for the subsequent age groups. For the "don't" task, the sex differences were more pronounced: girls showed significantly higher rates of committed compliance at every age group.

To sum up, some studies (Kochanska et al., 1989; Power & Chapieski, 1986; Regalado et al., 2004; Socolar et al., 2005; van Zeijl et al., 2007) have found that mothers of boys and girls have similar patterns in overall discipline practices, while others (Kochanska et al., 2003; Laumann, Michael, & Gagnon, 1994) have found differences. The direction of causality in studies that find sex differences is usually unclear, i.e. whether mothers use more harsh discipline on boys because they misbehave more frequently or whether the harsh discipline causes more misbehavior, or both.

1.1. Using dynamic systems theory to study gender and discipline

Many studies on maternal discipline and child behavior only use survey data, making it difficult to determine what an actual discipline event looks like, the complexities of the dyadic exchange, the contextual factors that influence how the event unfolds, etc. Moreover, much of the observational research has been conducted using experimentally manipulated scenarios designed to elicit discipline events (i.e. the "do/don't" tasks). While these approaches are important, they do not necessarily clarify the types of discipline that occur in everyday situations. Exceptions include the work of Hollenstein and colleagues who use state space grids to analyze moment by moment dynamics of disciplinary interactions between mothers and children (Granic, Hollenstein, Dishion, & Patterson, 2003; Hollenstein, Granic, Stoolmiller, & Snyder, 2004).

Many studies restrict observations to a small number of sessions conducted several months apart. While less labor and time-intensive, this approach may miss subtle changes in discipline interactions over time. Finally, it is important to conduct research on the discipline of very young children. Results from survey-based studies have shown that parents *do* discipline their children between the ages of 5 and 12 months, but very little observation-based work has examined this age group. It is unclear, for instance, how discipline practices at 5 months differ from discipline practices at 12 months. The greatest potential to set healthy patterns of discipline could be during early infancy (see Ravn et al., 2011, 2012) before the onset of discipline challenges that are created during the child's second year of life. For these methodological and theoretical reasons